



Thinking
Blue

Marxism and the (Post)Human

Writing

Red

Stephen Tumino



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3.

Globality

Sudamerica

The social uprisings in Argentina, Venezuela and Peru in 2001 against the neoliberal state — behind which stands the multinational coalition of financiers, businessmen and trade union bureaucracies that are forcibly imposing free market policies around the world under the banner of democracy — have shown the world that the only alternative to the extreme social inequality and instability of global capitalism is revolutionary class struggle.

The ongoing battle for workers' democracy in Latin America directly contradicts the mantra of neoliberalism that has been endlessly repeated across the political spectrum since the destruction of the Soviet bloc from the left as much as the right, in the academy as much as in the mainstream media; the claim that the world has entered a 'post-class' moment in which class struggle is over because of the new 'knowledge' economy and all that is left is to make do with capitalism.

In this familiar story, cultural changes like the Internet and the new eco-friendly lifestyle politics are supposed to have empowered the people against totalitarian power by decentering and deregulating their lives so that they can find freedom in the local and everyday, the sphere of consumption, rather than, as in the past, through class struggle over the socio-economic conditions of production.

What recent changes in global media and culture did in fact produce was a 'cyber' imaginary that hides from view the class conflict in global capitalism so as to normalize the exploitation of wage-labor by capital that is at the center of capitalism. In other words, it hides from view the fact that capitalism, as Marx and Engels explained over 150 years ago in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, is at its root based on social inequality — the inequality between the 'bourgeoisie [...], the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labor', and the 'proletariat, the class of modern wage-laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling

their labor-power in order to live'.¹

It is this unequal division of labor between owners and workers that makes capitalism exploitative. It does so, as Marx scientifically proved in *Capital*, by forcing workers to engage in 'surplus-labor' (labor beyond that required to meet their needs) so as to realize a profit for the bosses who are themselves free from the need to work for a living because they privately own the social means of production, which requires that the majority to have to work for them.²

Capitalism is considered democratic because it is the freedom to make voluntary exchanges in the market without regard to differences of 'rank' or 'merit' but on pure voluntary self-interest. As Marx explained, however, the dream of capitalism that free exchanges between legally equal persons ensures the social good of all, has always to be related to the actuality of capitalism as a social system of production. In actuality, capitalism is not simply a political system that ensures civil rights in a free market, but an economic system of production in which individuals basically stand in a relation of class inequality. They are either members of the working class, and thus free to work or starve because they own nothing but their ability to labor for others, or, capitalists who, owning the means of production as their private property, are free to force the majority to engage in surplus-labor over and above that which is required for meeting the worker's own needs so as to realize a profit for themselves.

Private property in production is what makes the social inequality of class in capitalism: class is the division between those who employ and consume labor (the exploiters) and those who do not but instead produce the social wealth (the exploited). The corporate media uses all its power to hide this class-consciousness from the people to make capitalism appear as the limit of freedom and democracy.

But freedom and democracy under capitalism is only for the few who can afford it because they live off the labor of the many. As capitalism develops on a global scale, the many cannot even meet their basic

1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 6, pp. 477–519 (p. 482).

2 Karl Marx, 'The Working Day', Chapt. 10, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 35, pp. 239–43.

needs and are compelled to enter into struggle against the bosses — as Argentina in 2001, after only ten years of neoliberal deregulation, and similarly as Venezuela, whose workers were forced to arm themselves simply to defend the minor redistributions of wealth of the Chavez government, have once again shown.

The reemergent revolutionary struggles in Latin America since 2001 once again prove the basic truth of Marxism: that the global development of capitalism leads to its own downfall by producing a revolutionary working class with nothing left to lose and a world to win by taking power from the owners and running the economy for the social good. This truth, however, is covered up by a thick layer of mystification by the corporate media through a variety of relays and mediations. This mystification serves to naturalize the social inequality at the basis of capitalism and maintain the status quo.

Take the lie that the global North, led by the US, has a moral destiny to bring freedom and democracy to the global South which is crushed by poverty and corruption. The poverty and corruption of course are the result of freedom and democracy — the freedom of the capitalist to exploit human labor power for profit, which is what in actuality ‘chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe’ and ‘compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; [...] to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst’, as *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* says.³

The ‘moral’ story about protecting human rights is told to conceal the material truth about democracy: that it is the freedom to exploit others for profit. The story is needed to alibi the regime of wage-labor and capital as a fact of nature. In other words, it portrays the normal daily exploitation of labor under capitalism as the free expression of human nature in comparison with which its everyday brutality is made to appear ‘extreme’ and ‘irrational’ rather than a socially necessary consequence of private property.

The representation of capitalism as natural is of course not natural at all but historical: it is needed now to manufacture consensus that capitalism cannot be changed when it has already become obvious that the material conditions exist to abolish class inequality.

3 Marx and Engles, ‘Manifesto’, p. 488.

As in the case of Venezuela, it has become obvious that what stands in the way of a regime directed toward meeting people's needs, which is what Chavez represents, is not a lack of respect for human rights by immoral and corrupt people in the global South, but the need of big business for a bigger share of the world market. It was the US oil giants represented by the Bush regime, supported by the trade union bureaucracy in the US, that aided the counter-revolutionary coup in Venezuela in 2002 (e.g., by fomenting the oil workers' strike as the core of a 'civil society' movement that tried to abolish the popular social reforms of the Chavez government). It is for profit, not democracy, that the US supported the reactionary coup to overthrow Chavez (not just in words but with financial aid, military weapons and advisors as the British Guardian reported); it is for profit and not for democracy that the US supports Israel, colonized Afghanistan so as to take Iraq, and foments 'color revolutions' around the world, from Yugoslavia to Ukraine.

It is obvious that US foreign policy is guided by profit and not democracy, which is why global public opinion is everywhere outside the US opposed to US 'unilateralism' and 'empire' building. This growing 'obviousness' of democracy as hegemony of the rich threatens the ideology of capitalism by exposing democracy as the bourgeois freedom to exploit the labor and resources of the world. It is also behind the formation of a transnational populist left, however, that goes along with the system of wage labor and capital by marking the obvious hoax of democracy but nevertheless channeling the opposition into a reformist politics to maintain capitalism. By merely contesting its obviously barbaric effects rather than engage in a radical critique of capitalism for a social revolution against wage-slavery that is the cause of the effects, the left supports the ideology of democracy as class rule. It thus goes along with the reactionary backlash ascendant in the wake of the Cold War to make social contradictions into problems of 'governance' of essentially 'unruly' subjects so that the powerless are made to bear responsibility for the contradictions of class society.

What has emerged in the wake of the revolutionary explosions in Latin America in the new millennium is the growing awareness that it is becoming impossible to simply deny the basic truth of Marxism on democracy as class dictatorship. As a result, newer mystifications of capitalism and why

it changes have also emerged to stabilize the status quo.

The dominant mode of naturalizing capitalism is to represent the new popular struggles as spontaneous movements of the oppressed, by denying that they are a product of history as class struggle over the conditions of production. Rather than produce awareness of the class interests behind the emerging struggles the populist left portrays them as the outcome of spontaneous rebellions of the people against power. It is thus on the left most of all that one finds the alibi of capitalism as democracy that proposes capitalism may be reformed while the exploitation at its root remains intact. A reformed capitalism is simply a code for a more efficient regime of exploitation and imperialist brutality — it is appeasement of the violent democracy of the owners.

Middling Class

Argentina and Venezuela provide a useful occasion for proving the truth of class against the global post-class ideology because although the class conflict has dramatically exploded into public view in these countries and has since become impossible to deny as an ongoing daily reality, what one finds in the dominant media instead are ‘stories’ of the ‘middling’ of class designed to re-describe class as a cultural matter and block the need for class-conscious solutions to the unfolding crisis.

For example, the dominant media focuses on different styles of protest in Argentina like those of the ‘*cacerolazo*’ (pots and pans demonstrations) and ‘*piqueteros*’ (the unemployed and poor workers who protest without pots and pans ‘because they have none’) instead of explaining why these differences are effects of basically unequal economic relations and not merely cultural. These local differences need to be overcome to realize a new society without class inequality; fixing these differences as cultural matters is a way to divide workers and keep them powerless against their exploiters who are demanding more and more austerity from them.

One effect of the ‘middling’ of class is to make class appear to be such a complex thing that solutions to the social crisis based on the material conflict of interest in society between capital and labor appear simplistic and unreliable as well as manipulative and suspect. Solutions to the crisis based on class struggle can then easily be dismissed as signs of an

out-of-touch nostalgia with a 'dead' ideological past as well as signs of a hopeless 'anti-American' future. One finds routinely in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for example, such conclusions which reveal more about the basically fascist ideology of a US elite who can only read the political expressions of the needs of the world's people as a pious or perverse death-wish out of touch with 'reality' than they do about the actual impact of global capitalism on working people's lives and what it causes them to do. As the social eruptions in Argentina and Venezuela against neoliberalism were the first to show, however, there is nothing more dead than the 'post' ideology that class is dead. In order to contain this awareness newer class ideologies have become necessary that do not simply deny class struggle but attempt to re-describe it as cultural conflict so as to provide a middle ground for reformist solutions, which maintain the social inequality at the root of capitalism.

Before turning to consider 'left' and even 'marxist' stories of class as culture, which are against class as the structure of necessity, I will briefly read the popular media representations. In this way I will bring out the underlying ideological sameness of the bourgeois order that is usually cloaked behind local idiomatic differences. The 'middling' of class occurs in the mainstream media in a variety of ways that all have in common the erasure of class-consciousness, or, what I am calling the awareness of the material conflict between exploiters and exploited that makes capitalism capitalism, explains why social crisis and poverty exist in the midst of wealth, and why class struggle is necessary.

The different ways of 'middling' class in the media correspond to the local differences in global capitalism which has to manufacture consensus for the status quo from differences that have arisen on the basis of the capitalist division of labor and its need for different kinds of workers; between 'high' and 'low-tech' workers, for example. These local differences, which are the effect of production, are represented as cultural differences of consciousness and behavior in the dominant media so as to contain awareness of the conflicts which arise because of the class division between the 'haves' and 'have nots' that periodically threatens to reveal the basic inequality in capitalism between the interests of capital (a merely formal democracy where economics is directed toward the accumulation of wealth for a few) and those of labor (a social democracy where economics is directed toward meeting

the needs of the many).

The most popular way to disguise class with a 'middling' logic is the method of the mainstream news media that appears most non-ideological of all because it uses the codes of 'description' and 'neutrality' to hide the class antagonism at the core of capitalism. For example, in the news coverage of events in Argentina since the 'Argentinazo' uprising December 2001, the difference between the uprisings that took place over food and medicine and the *cacerolazo* demonstrations that formed because of the freezing of bank accounts to meet the balance of payments to the global speculators in Argentine financial markets, is regularly represented as the 'poor rioting' on the one hand, and therefore a matter for the police forces to handle, and 'middle-class rage' on the other, which is given a political significance as legitimate anti-government protest. What this cultural coding of class in the dominant media does is hide the true class basis that is the cause of the conflicts and that goes beyond Argentina.

The profit imperative that guides capitalist competition, as well as the government policies that protect this imperative by continuing to subsidize the wealth of a few and devaluing the small savings of the many, are the reasons there are poor and unemployed workers to begin with. Underlying both the 'poor rioting' and 'middle-class rage' is a single socio-economic system directed toward profit maximization in which the needs of workers are secondary.

It is the profit imperative — which compels the capitalists to invest more and more in technology in order to lower their labor costs so as to more effectively compete with other capitalists — that produces the unemployment. In a system directed toward meeting people's needs, there would be no need for unemployment. The profit motive is also what lies behind the economic bankruptcy of the government, which has seized the small bank deposits of the many in order to pay off the global financial investors. Moreover, these investors are themselves forced to speculate in the international financial markets to realize a profit on their capital because it no longer pays enough of a return to invest in the real economy of plant and equipment that is already highly efficient and overproductive.

In other words, behind the superficial appearance of differences between the problems of the 'poor' and 'middle-class' is the same class

logic of capitalism that periodically produces the crisis of overproduction (mass poverty in the midst of social wealth) that acutely affects places in the global South such as Argentina. Such crises occur not because of purely financial mechanisms that exceed any possible political regulation in the new global economy, as the neoliberals claim, but because labor productivity is now so high, due to advanced technological efficiency, that it is no longer profitable to invest capital in production while, at the same time, labor is so cheap, because of the unemployment and cutbacks in social services, that workers cannot afford to buy the commodities they themselves produce.

It is for this reason that even before the financial crash that sparked the 2001 Argentinazo, estimates of Argentine unemployment and underemployment were around 20% and, more importantly, official government estimates of poverty had themselves placed half the population in this category even while Argentina was being celebrated as a model 'democracy'.

The representation of class struggle in Argentina as merely a matter of different problems facing the 'poor' and 'middle' classes and their mode of responding to them does the work of middling class and deflecting class-consciousness. It does so by representing the most needy sections of the working class as an 'irrational' threat to peaceful society whose politics must be met by force and another section of the working class, who have been able to save some money for times of hardship, appear like 'reasonable' people because they do not challenge property relations directly but focus only on the official policies that maintain the status quo. The workers who engage in struggle against the neoliberal policies of the official political institutions are represented as rational 'middle-class' people while those workers whose politics challenge the principle of social inequality directly are the 'rioting poor' who are politically ignorant and only understand force.

In reality, what is being called a 'rational' and 'reasonable' protest because it pressures the government to reform itself is not ultimately in the interests of those called 'middle-class' much less the 'poor'. It is only in the interests of the wealthy who need people to believe that capitalism can be politically reformed and need not be socially transformed, because it is exploitative at root. The actions of those workers who directly challenge existing property relations by expropriating the food

and medicine they need to live from those who want to profit from them are called 'rioting poor' and coded as 'irrational' for the same reason: to deflect attention from the primary division in society between exploiters and exploited and the anarchic logic of the economic system based on this division.

Class is made a matter of culture by the dominant media (class as levels of political 'reasonableness') in order to divide and block the unity of the workers. This is done by instilling in them the values of compromise and negotiation with their exploiters so that they consent to their collective exploitation to make profit for a few rather than take power into their own hands and run the economy to meet the needs of the many.

The Left Carnaval

The most effective middling of class — 'effective' in terms of hiding that what is at stake in the wake of the insurgencies of the global South is the truth of class and the future of capitalism — is that which is found on the left because of its overt political questioning of the more oppressive features of capitalism.

Read, for example, the articles on the Argentinazo that appeared in the French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*. One such article, for instance, objected to cultural 'commentators' who 'have attempted to play down events, claiming that this was little more than a show of bad temper on the part of the middle classes'.⁴ The reason for the objection to the mainstream media's focus on the 'middle classes' here is not to uncover the class conflict at the root of capitalism but to once again pluralize class into cultural differences and blur the basic class division in society. 'The revolt' is thus represented as 'the result of an alliance between the poorest people and the urban middle classes' and not an expression of basic working class collectivity that stands to challenge capitalism at its root.

What is assumed on the left is that class is a political 'alliance' and not an economic structure. The class antagonism between exploiters and

4 Diana Quattrocchi-Woisson, 'Ten Days that Shook the World Bank', *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2002, <https://mondediplo.com/2002/02/08tendays>.

exploited, it is assumed, has ended and cultural struggles for merely reforming capitalism in its localities have taken its place. Thus, in *Le Monde Diplomatique* the proof of class is not that the 'have nots' must engage in struggle with the 'haves' just to be able to eat (and thereby prove the bankruptcy of capitalism as a regime of democratic equality), rather, it is 'what people were singing on 19 December'. This focus on 'the national anthem and a song that openly poked fun at the state of emergency the authorities had declared' gives capitalism a popular democratic cover.⁵ Because the singing included 'the national anthem' and 'poked fun' at the same time, it symbolizes, in this populist left cultural imaginary, an 'alliance' of the ever loyal 'middle class' and desperately cynical 'poor'. This takes the focus off of class as the massive unmet need of the majority and instead celebrates events in Argentina as a carnival of the people. This same writer, predictably, sees in the neighborhood assemblies ('interbarrials') that have emerged across the country — whose program of demands include direct challenges to capitalist rule such as repudiation of the foreign debt, the nationalization of the banks, the renationalization of all privatized utilities, popular election of Supreme Court judges, the taking into state control of pension funds, etc. — not the radical expression of working class needs but a place for more cultural consumption. The interbarrials are reduced to 'talking shops where all manner of daring, innovative ideas circulate', like a Starbucks, only with more interesting and 'colorful' people than usual.⁶ The celebration of culture is supposed to signal to the reader the death of class struggle, as can be seen when it is contrasted to the 'rioting' (popular expropriations of food and medicine) as a reflection of 'the despair of people with no political direction or agenda'. Rioting, in other words, is not a class issue of food and the need to change the system but a moral issue of a lack of 'hope'. For *Le Monde Diplomatique*, in short, class is culture (singing, knowledge, feelings) not economic struggle (politics of need).

The shift from economics to culture in considering class is made in order to claim that what was occurring in Argentina was not class struggle that puts workers and owners in conflict over the purpose of democracy — that is, whether 'democracy' is a matter of merely 'equal

5 Ibid., n. pag.

6 Ibid., n. pag.

rights' or of economic equality. Instead, it represented the class struggle in Argentina as a matter of 'casting off the most deeply ingrained habits of [...] political culture' on the part of 'a new generation, born under a democracy' in which the goal is for people to have more of 'a say in economic and political decisions [...] with a sort of street veto'.⁷ In short, 'democracy' is equated with more bourgeois freedom of speech (which is the freedom to exploit) not economic freedom from need (the power to abolish exploitation).

In another article in the same magazine the same post-class cultural logic is evident with slight variation: 'In the past, demonstrators had always obeyed strike rules, marching in columns behind their union or party banners. This time, they came out simply as citizens' (Gabetta, n. pag.).⁸ What this story of generational changes in cultures of protest does is obscure the basic class division in society so as to place class elsewhere as a strictly cultural matter of the 'people' spontaneously acting out against 'power': 'the people of the country rose in protest [...] saying that it had had enough of universal corruption'.⁹ A 'bad' political culture that 'corrupts' the people's spontaneity is the problem, not an exploitative economic system that makes them into wage slaves who must take to the streets in order to meet their basic needs. This is of course the same logic used by the IMF/World Bank, which explains away the contradictions of global capitalism in the global South as local problems of corrupt governance in need of more 'democratic' reforms (by force of arms if necessary), in order to manage the current systemic crisis and normalize exploitation.

The Empire-al Imaginary

Central to the ideological work of giving global capitalism the face of freedom by covering up its basic class inequality and what it makes necessary is Hardt and Negri's manifesto of the new capitalism: *Empire*.¹⁰ It is for this reason that the book was an academic 'best seller'

7 Ibid., n. pag.

8 Carlos Gabetta, 'Argentina: IMF Show State Revolts', *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2002, <https://mondediplo.com/2002/01/12argentina>.

9 Ibid., n. pag.

10 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

and was celebrated on its publication in 2000 as ‘the next big thing’ by such official organs of finance capital as *The New York Times* and *Charlie Rose*. Of course, calling the book ‘the next big thing’ simply repeats, in a popular idiom for those who cannot afford to read the book, its central premise — ‘imperialism is over’. It has been displaced by ‘empire’: a ‘new form of sovereignty’, where cyber-labor ‘creates the very world it inhabits’.¹¹

Empire has been so celebrated by the dominant because it is directed against explaining the world as an effect of the economic laws of motion of capital accumulation, which is necessary for transforming it, by announcing a new world free from the past that changes because of changes in rhetoric (freedom of speech). It is rhetoric, for example, to say that ‘imperialism is over’ because we now live in a world system where ‘the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another’.¹² The purpose of this is to make the source of profit in unpaid surplus-labor explained by Marx’s labor theory of value a ‘fiction’.¹³ Without Marx’s labor theory, there can of course be no basic contestation of capitalism but only moral condemnation of its more oppressive effects that keeps exploitation intact by immunizing it from critique. *Empire*, in short, does the ideological work of capital by giving it a human face: by displacing Marx’s ruthless critique of ‘surplus-labor’ with the sentimentality of ‘affective labor’.

‘Affective labor’ is one of the phrases for the ‘autonomy’ of labor, that is, labor as desire rather than praxis in the new order — ‘a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight and forge alternative constitutive itineraries’.¹⁴ ‘Affective labor’ occults the extraction of surplus-labor by capital that is the source of profit behind the resurgent drive of imperialism in the 21st century and the emergent revolution against it. Moreover, it mystifies the fact that history is at root exploited labor and not a matter of people’s desire. Instead, it is the surplus-labor that workers produce for free that is stolen by capitalists, which makes history. Without surplus-labor there can be no capitalism. History will only change when the expropriators

11 Ibid., pp. xii, xiv-xv.

12 Ibid., p. iii.

13 Ibid., p. 402.

14 Ibid., p. 48.

of labor are expropriated by the laborers and 'society inscribes on its banner: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!'.¹⁵ To displace surplus-labor, the political economy of need, with affective labor, the symbolic economy of desire, is thus a theory of social change against the workers in complicity with the ruling class.

Behind the premise that 'imperialism' has been displaced by 'empire' is the reduction of history to 'politics' (desire) and the erasure of the primacy of the economic (need). 'Empire' is Hardt and Negri's imaginary of a new time in capitalism free of history that cannot be explained by class struggle. 'Empire' is, they claim, beyond 'the fiction of any measure of the working day'.¹⁶ In actuality 'empire' represents the moment in their analytic when material interests do not enter into consideration on the alibi that labor is no longer economically exploited at the site of production (because, they say, it is 'post-fordist', 'flexible', and 'co-operative'). Whether it is called 'multitude'; 'creative', 'affective' or 'immaterial labor'; or a 'new proletariat', the idealism is the same: a trope of spontaneity and freedom from necessity is meant to signal a basic change in capitalism that makes it impossible to materially explain what makes capitalism and why it changes. Their concept of labor is thus really a trope of cultural resistance, a change of values. As another 'autonomist' marxist puts it:

labor is for capital always a problematic 'other' that must constantly be controlled and subdued, and that, as persistently, circumvents or challenges this command. Rather than being organized by capital, workers struggle against it. It is this struggle that constitutes the working class.¹⁷

Labor and class, in this volunteerist logic, are the same as Foucault's idea of 'power' ('power is everywhere' and 'where there is power there is resistance') — only in *Empire*, Foucault's idealist theory of power is masked in a new 'popular' form now that it is impossible to any longer ignore class analysis of the daily.¹⁸ But, it is 'class' as more cultural

15 Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), 24, pp. 75–99 (p. 87).

16 *Empire*, p. 402.

17 Nick Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana-Champaign: Illinois University Press, 1999), p. 65.

18 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990),

politics to go along to get along with capitalist inequality, not class as the cause of who is/is not hungry, sick, housed and why.

‘Class as struggle’, in Hardt and Negri’s schema, takes the focus of off production (the social relation in which labor stands in a necessary relation to capital and, therefore, determines what is to be done in the struggle) and puts it on consumption (where labor is ‘free’ to reproduce itself only to be exploited because of the privatization of the means of production that is the source of profit). This displacement once again makes Marx and Engels’ point that ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’.¹⁹ By using the ‘spontaneity’ of ‘class as struggle’ and ‘autonomous labor’ as a way to occult how private property makes labor ‘free’, Hardt and Negri trivialize worker’s agency as a matter of desire. Changing ‘tastes’ and ‘values’, as in conservative discourses, are represented as just as important as changing property relations. What such a sentimental view of labor and class as cultural change does is blur the line between production (base) and consumption (superstructure) so the class priority of revolutionary praxis is undermined by an opportunist pragmatics that appeases imperialism — the multinational coalition that is raping the global South for the benefit of a few in the global North.

‘Affective labor’ is in reality a sentimental romanticization of the effects of the falling rate of profit. It portrays the more flexible, and therefore more exploited (i.e., more reliant on capital), workforce of global capitalism as free to (re)make the social. In actuality society changes not owing to the management of workers desire but owing to changes required by the need to make profit in the context of private competition. Worker’s ‘desire’ is itself a matter of need and not free of material history (the law of value). Workers struggle against capital because their needs are not being met. This resistance is what constitutes trade unionism, which is the normal rule of capitalism. Workers’ resistance is what Lenin called ‘economism’: ‘arguments that a kopek added to a ruble was worth more than any socialism’.²⁰ Its social effects can be seen in the multinational

pp. 93, 95.

19 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 5, p. 59.

20 V. I. Lenin, ‘What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement’, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 5, pp. 347–529 (p. 381).

trade-union solidarity against the 'Bolivarian revolution' in Venezuela in 2001. The American Center for International Labor Solidarity, the international arm of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, materially supported the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers whose leaders conspired with the coup plotters. This shows that there is nothing 'autonomous' about workers' struggles. They either support capitalism or socialism. To represent workers' struggles as 'free' to make the world is to conflate them with the agency of capitalism itself that is in power everywhere, including the workers' agencies. This conflation is part of the routine functioning of capitalism needed to manage its contradictions and keep the workers exploited.

Workers will only really be free to change the world when they take power over their own production(s) so no one's needs are unmet because the economy is planned to provide for them. For them to succeed in this there must be advanced for(u)m(s) of class-consciousness where they can learn to become vanguard fighters for socialism. As Lenin explains:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology [...] This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, [...] they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge. But in order that working men may succeed in this more often, every effort must be made to raise the level of the consciousness of the workers in general; it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of 'literature for workers' but that they learn to an increasing degree to master general literature. It would be even truer to say 'are not confined', instead of 'do not confine themselves', because the workers themselves wish to read and do read all that is written for the intelligentsia, and only a few (bad) intellectuals believe that it is enough 'for workers' to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known.²¹

In order for workers to succeed in this historical task of acquiring class-consciousness it is necessary to critique the spontaneity of economism, which displaces global class struggle for the good of all with local

21 Ibid., p. 384.

struggle for a privileged few. Class-consciousness is the other of the false consciousness of workers' resistance to (and maintenance of) capitalism that is now masquerading as a new 'radical' and 'marxist' theory not only in the writings of the 'autonomist' marxists but the populist left as a whole (as represented by such journals as *Social Text*, *Monthly Review* and *Rethinking Marxism*).

The North Atlantic left has abandoned a materialist analysis of the world needed to change it, and nothing so much reveals its bankruptcy than the mainstream success of *Empire*. Behind its claim that 'imperialism is over' is a fundamental idealism that says ideas (tropes of desire) shape the world rather than the other way around, which supports the most barbaric imperialism the world has ever seen to date. *Empire* serves imperialism by reiterating the dominant post-al ideology of the end of history in the mode of a tropic performance of resistance where labor is represented as free desire to make the world outside of history.

Not only is the post-al dogma of the end of class struggle found in its assumed premises, but also in its explicit statements. *Empire* reiterates, for example, that the US is 'different' from the rest of the world, not because of what Fukuyama et al. celebrated as its liberal pluralism (which today obviously stands exposed as a cover for world domination) but, using a more philosophical and high-tech idiom, because of its unique 'composition of social forces' which ensures that 'power' is 'effectively distributed in networks' of 'affective labor' that cannot be explained by the working of the law of value central to capitalism.²²

In place of the logic of profit *Empire* systematically deploys the (a)logic of desire coded as 'immaterial' and 'affective labor'. On this (a)logic what is it that compels the US to back counter-revolution in Venezuela, exploit Argentina through its debt agencies, expropriate the labor and resources in Afghanistan, support Israeli imperialism, engage in nuclear brinkmanship against Russia and China through proxy war in Ukraine and militarist provocations in Taiwan,...? According to Hardt and Negri, it is not the drive to profit from the 'free' labor of the world but 'desire': the old modern national desire to 'police the purity of its own identity and to exclude all that was other' unaware of the new times of 'cooperative' social relations represented for them by the US.²³

22 *Empire*, pp. xiii-xiv.

23 *Empire*, p. xii.

Empire is a religious and therefore reactionary text. Its basic idea is that the world is an expression of an ahistorical essence (e.g., 'labor is a form giving fire'): the 'constitutive power' of affective labor, which is the code for representing the informal high-tech sector in the North as a 'co-operative' social arrangement that makes socialism unnecessary. This agency is ahistorical because it is posited as existing independently of the series of material conflicts over the social relations of property. As in Foucault, 'materiality' is made a matter of desire, 'affective labor' is an 'excess' of history that 'resists' explanation, while its historicity is idealist, only ever considered genealogically, i.e., as a discursive construction. In other words, Hardt and Negri's 'labor' is what Foucault called an 'event': 'the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it'.²⁴ Like all events, it is secondary and superficial. The most important effect of such an ahistorical view of labor is its class opposition to the only consistently materialist theory of labor: Marx's labor theory of value. Marx's theory explains the agency of labor not as spontaneous resistance to causal explanation in the world without borders, which is in actuality a throwback to the 'mechanical' (ahistorical) materialism of the eighteenth century, but as an effect of 'the ensemble of the social relations': i.e., the ongoing class conflicts over the conditions of production.²⁵

Against the totally discredited postmodern micro-politics of the past, *Empire* represents a desire-full social totality that tails the popular movements by recognizing the need for systemic change. But because it maintains that the social totality exceeds theory and cannot be reliably explained, it authorizes the immaterial 'stories' of change over materialist theory of change. Change of rhetoric to provide therapy of 'hope' in capitalism is put before red criti(que)al theory for explaining the world so as to change it. Such 'hope' is needed to contain the newer contradictions of the system in which anti-globalization is becoming global anti-capitalism. *Empire* re-news the bourgeois ideology of agency as 'free' by giving it a new life as autonomous labor (which is simply a

24 Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 139–64 (p. 154).

25 Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feurebach', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 5, pp. 3–8 (p. 4).

metaphorical embellishment for a trade union-y populism) so as to do what bourgeois ideology has always done: cover up the class antagonism central to capitalism. But, as Lenin said

there can be no talk of an independent ideology [...] the only choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course [...] in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology.²⁶

In actuality, it is of course the imperialist system of profit that explains why intellectuals in the North can afford to believe the world changes with merely cultural changes while brutal exploitation and unmet need is the daily reality for most people in the world. This reality will only end with the social expropriation of property by the exploited not by affective co-operation with the exploiters. Venezuela most of all proves the impossibility of such cross-class co-operation because there the revolution (in the form of the neighborhood Bolivarian circles) was forced to arm itself in preparation for the next ‘bay of pigs’ being prepared in the US.

Imperialism certainly is not merely political (sovereignty) as *Empire* claims, but represents, as Lenin theorized, ‘the highest stage of capitalism’. It is Lenin’s integrated theory of the social, which explains socio-political changes as an effect of class forces, that *Empire* is directed against by announcing a new ‘sovereignty’ based on cyber (‘affective’) labor.

Imperialism, however, is the only materialist analysis of global capitalism that explains the contemporary world situation by grasping the rule of necessity (the law of value, or, i.e., the production for profit central to capitalism) underlying the surface events rather than merely (re)describing these events so as to more effectively explain away the social laws that produce them and alibi the ruling class. To fragment such an integrated understanding of the world under the sentimentality of affective labor is, as Lenin explains, ‘to sink to the role of a sophist’ by substituting for ‘the question of the *substance* of the struggle and agreements between capitalist associations’ the ‘question of the form of these struggles and agreements (today peaceful, tomorrow war-like, the next day war-like again’.²⁷ In actuality,

²⁶ ‘What Is To Be Done?’, p. 384.

²⁷ V. I. Lenin, ‘Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism. A Popular Outline’, V. I.

the question as to whether these changes are 'purely' economic or non-economic (e.g., military) is a secondary one, which does not in the least affect the fundamental view on the latest epoch of capitalism [...]. [T]he forms of the struggle may and do constantly change [...] but the *substance* of the struggle, its class content, positively *cannot* change while classes exist.²⁸

It is only by grasping the essence of history in class that imperialism is explained and thus available to be changed. Why? Because imperialism is that moment in the circuit of capital accumulation when the capitalist must pursue profit and enter into competition with others on a global scale because of the falling rate of profit in their national markets that testifies to the moribund state of the system and its 'ripeness' for socialism. It explains why at its highest stage capitalist

[c]ompetition becomes transformed into monopoly. The result is immense progress in the socialization of production. In particular, the process of technical invention and improvement becomes socialized [...] Production becomes social, but appropriation remains private. The social means of production remain the private property of a few. The general framework of formally recognized free competition remains, but the yoke of a few monopolists on the rest of the population becomes a hundred times heavier, more burdensome and intolerable [...] Domination, and violence that is associated with it, such are the relationships that are most typical of the 'latest phase of capitalist development'; that is what must inevitably result, and has resulted, from the formation of all-powerful economic monopolies.²⁹

Lenin's theory of imperialism is explanatory and therefore transformative: it exposes the contradictions of the system and opens space for change by providing a framework for the emergent struggles that takes them beyond the class limits of ideology that accommodates and naturalizes capitalist inequality and points toward what is to be done for social justice for all.

What is needed now is not more of the 'hope'-full stories of 'co-operation' and getting along repeated by *Empire*, but Lenin's red criti(que)al theory as force for change — theory that is radical because

Lenin Collected Works, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 22, pp. 185–304 (p. 253).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 253.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 205, 207.

it grasps the root of the system in exploited labor and brings it to bear upon the false consciousness of class. This root is radical because it explains the laws of the system that govern its movements, explains why imperialism today is a symptom of decaying capitalism — i.e., capitalism that has lost its viability because it does not meet the needs of the people and is practically ripe for socialist transformation — and why for a new society free of exploitation workers must learn to become what Lenin calls ‘socialist theorists’ (*teoretikov sotsializma*).³⁰ This is especially necessary now that workers’ struggles have taken up revolutionary tasks against imperialism, while the populist left celebrates these struggles as the rule of spontaneity that fetishizes democracy over revolution and blinds the people: ‘The most dangerous people of all in this respect are those who do not wish to understand that the fight against imperialism is a sham and humbug unless it is inseparably bound up with the fight against opportunism’.³¹

30 ‘What Is To Be Done?’, p. 384.

31 ‘Imperialism’, p. 302.